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Vamping up Sex: Audience, Age, & Portrayals of Sexuality in Vampire Narratives

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Vampirism and sexuality have been bedfellows since the first vampire narratives began to dominate print literature in the 18th century. Although it might at first appear to be quite removed from the gothic realm that houses vampire storylines, another category of literature has also long been associated with sexuality. Young adult literature is well known for its attention to interpersonal relationships, self-exploration, budding romance, teen angst, and, of course, teen sex. As such, it is not surprising that young adult texts began merging their narrative recipes with that of traditional gothic vampire tales. These hybrid narratives have since proliferated, especially throughout the last three decades. Stefanie Meyer's now infamous *Twilight* saga (2005-2008) has brought renewed attention to the popularity of such young adult vampire narratives. Her series also resurrected the criticism vampire storylines (young adult or otherwise) often face for their portrayals of gender and sexuality.

This essay examines the *Twilight* series as part of the longstanding tradition of vampire narratives – many seeped with contradictory gender portrayals and

diverse depictions of sexuality. In this article I analyze *Twilight* historically, as a product of its time and as a product of its textual predecessors. In doing so, I will draw upon literary critiques of canonical texts like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and of best-selling books like Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976-2003), both of which have been made into Hollywood films. I also analyze *Twilight* in terms of its target audience by comparing it to a popular young adult vampire series that predated it, L.J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-1992), as well as to the television cult-phenomenon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), both of which have also appeared in different mediated formats.

The texts selected for this analysis against the *Twilight* saga target two different types of audiences: mainstream vampire narratives (intended to be read by a wide, and predominantly adult, readership), such as *Dracula* and *The Vampire Chronicles*, and young adult vampire narratives (marketed directly to a more narrow, usually female, teen demographic), such as *The Vampire Diaries* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Comparing these subsets of vampire literature allows one to see how vampire narratives shift based on their intended audience. This discussion also helps to explain how some of the problems critics find with the *Twilight* series may be linked to its adherence to the tropes of the young adult vampire tale. Although a great number of vampire narratives could have been selected to represent these two groupings, I have selected *Dracula*, *The Vampire Chronicles*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* based on their popular reception and the attention they received by scholars. *Dracula*, a novel that has been read widely since its publication over two centuries ago, exists as an antecedent text for almost all vampire narratives that follow it. Anne Rice's series created a cult following and helped to revive popular interest in

vampire narratives at the end of the 20th century (“Anne Rice” 1). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spawned an active fan following which resulted in numerous academic studies not only on the program itself, but of the active audience it drew in. L.J. Smith’s series, although popular, did not receive as much attention as the texts it is being read against. However, its revival in 2008 as a novel series and its 2009 transition onto the small screen make it a useful text to read alongside of *Twilight*.

All of these vampire narratives provide a useful space to analyze the fictionalized constructs of gender and sexuality, to see how these are presented to different audiences, and how they result in storylines and themes that may produce troubling gender analyses, as has *Twilight*. As a result of these comparisons, this essay explores how gender politics and sexuality are portrayed across a subset of vampire narratives – across time, audience, and mediated format – arguing that *Twilight* is simply one vampire narrative in a long line that has sparked controversial gender analyses and feminist criticism from scholars. Nina Auerbach in her analysis of *Dracula* and Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in their criticism of Rice’s series, for example, claim that vampire narratives are often a reflection of their contemporary time, the political landscape, and that they can even point to the progress and/or stumbling points of movements, such as feminism. This essay entertains their suggestion that vampire narratives are a product of their own time period and seeks to discover if, and how, Meyer’s saga represents the current time period and/or speaks to the present state of feminism. Moreover, this article analyzes how the *Twilight* books function specifically as *young adult vampire narratives* and questions whether this complicates their portrayals of gender and sexuality so important to feminist scholars.

Through the Feminist Looking Glass: Gender-Based Critiques of Twilight

A brief overview of the criticism and defenses Meyer's books have inspired is needed before delving into how the series evolves from the vampire narratives that precede it. It would be an understatement to simply note that the series has received "mixed" reviews. More interesting are the contradictory feelings fans themselves have had for the books as the saga progressed. Cultural critic Eric Jost summed up the love-hate relationship many readers have with Meyers's texts, commenting that never before had he "found a series so compelling, while at the same time been so offended by a story's content and despicable cast of characters" (1). When looking at the criticism the series has had at large, the criticism from self-proclaimed feminists has been the most regular, and often the most negative, in terms of gender representations. For example, Jezebel.com calls Meyer's final book, *Breaking Dawn*, a "creepy anti-abortion allegory" that promotes teen motherhood and a fundamentally conservative ideology (Anna 2). Others accuse *Twilight* of being "a how-to manual for an abusive relationship" (Voynar 2). For some the problem lies within the characters Meyer crafted, rather than in the plot of the novels themselves. Jost, for instance, suggests that Meyer began with a storyline that had the potential to be "a provocative piece of gothic fantasy" but then marred it through the creation of unlikable, anti-feminist characters and an anachronistic setting which forces modern readers into the mindset of a previous time in which "women were property and only received validation from men's opinions of them" (1).

For some critics, the depiction of the main character, Isabella "Bella" Swan – a self-deprecating teenage girl who becomes fixated on Edward Cullen, the vampire who will remain her love interest and

partner throughout the series – seems to be the common jumping off point for critical analyses. Leonard Sax, the author of *Why Gender Matters*, points out the difference between the *Twilight* books and the blockbuster young adult collections that came before them. Harry Potter, a young adult series originally marketed for young adults and children, crossed over into mainstream culture and was eventually read by males and females of all age groups (Sax 2008). He suggests that although *Twilight* experienced a similar crossover, its intended demographic was always much narrower and more gendered; the books specifically target teenage girls and young women, and that is predominantly who reads them. Sax argues that the allure of *Twilight* for this smaller audience is exactly what critics have a problem with – its marriage of modern sensibility and traditional notions of gender. Sax points out that this combination of a modern setting with outdated gender norms is quite unusual in young adult literature today. But, yet, in *Twilight*, traditional gender stereotypes abound. The principal “male characters, Edward Cullen and Jacob Black, are muscular and unwaveringly brave, while Bella and the other girls bake cookies, make supper for the men and hold all-female slumber parties” (B7). To add to some already problematic characterizations, Bella is consistently depicted as the damsel in distress forever in need of rescue by a male.

Beyond the troubling gender portrayals present in the book, other critics have taken offense to the way the series deals with sexuality. Although teen sexual desire is a common motif of Meyer’s *Eclipse*, the underlying message present is that sex is sinful and off limits. This is seen repeatedly as Bella’s advances are cast aside by Edward, who wishes to preserve her virtue by waiting until they are married to first have sexual intercourse. More troubling than these moralistic scenes of rejection, which some claim are

present to advocate abstinence, are the ones in *Breaking Dawn* where Bella and Edward finally, after marriage, have sex. As a result of this sought after union, Bella ends up physically hurt due to coming into repeated close contact with Edward's hard, marble-like body, her body covered in bruises, and blames herself for the injuries Edward has accidentally caused. In this case, despite their marital status, sexual intercourse is *still* dangerous. Also, Bella's self-blame for the injuries she obtained during consensual intercourse, sounds all too similar to rape victims who blame themselves for being assaulted after the fact.

It should be noted, however, that not all critics have found the series to be a disturbing addition to young adult literature. In fact, film critic Kim Voynar responded to some of the most common feminist concerns with the book. The first major criticism she focuses on is the claim that the series is inherently anti-feminist due to the fact that Bella is willing to give up her life and become a vampire in order to stay with Edward forever. Voynar argues that Bella was never really willing to choose Edward over all else, that, in fact, she always thought, or at least hoped, she could somehow keep her friends and family in her life after she became a vampire. The second criticism Voynar refutes is that Bella and Edward's relationship is abusive in nature because he wields all control. To disprove this notion, Voynar chooses to focus on Bella's control toward the end of the series. She notes specifically Bella's self-control post-transformation, arguing that the depiction of her strength and her ability to manage her blood lust does not speak "of a female character who's inherently weak and controlled by others" (3). Voynar also points out that Bella was never a passive figure in her relationships with Edward. Throughout the series she makes her own decisions: to pursue Edward, to advance their physical relations, and to be joined with him for eternity.

The third concern Voynar addresses deals specifically with *Breaking Dawn* and the claim that the text is anti-feminist due to Bella's pregnancy. Many feminists have been bothered by Bella's refusal to terminate the pregnancy, especially when carrying the half-vampire child almost kills her. Some consider the book to be a piece of anti-abortion rhetoric. Voynar finds this particular claim troubling. She writes:

For me, a big part of my feminist beliefs [has] to do with the concept of choice; that is to say, I believe that feminism is about being pro-choice, which is not the same as being pro-abortion. The idea of pro-choice means supporting women in making the choice that's right for them around a pregnancy – not proselytizing abortion as the only 'right' choice. (Voynar 3)

She argues that Bella's devotion to seeing the pregnancy through and protecting her unborn child is not as far-fetched as some readers believe. Voynar poses the question: "since when is motherhood and maternal impulse inherently anti-feminist?" (4). Voynar is not the only scholar who has seen redeeming qualities in the series. Caitlin Flanagan, staff writer for *The Atlantic*, took a more negotiated stance on the series, reading it as a throwback to young adult literature of the past. While many read Edward and Bella's relationship as dysfunctional, Flanagan depicts it in a more positive light: "*Twilight* centers on a boy who loves a girl so much that he refuses to defile her, and on a girl who loves him so dearly that she is desperate for him to do just that, even if the wages of the act are expulsion from her family and from everything she has ever known" (3). She argues that "Meyer has re-created the sort of middle-class American youth in which it was unheard of for a nice girl to be a sexual aggressor," something she feels has been missing in the young adult

literature of the most recent decades (Flannagan 4).

Vampire Narratives “Progress” in the 21st Century?

Although many would like to claim that the Twilight books are *not* representative of the 21st century, their massive popularity makes some wonder. For example, Sax asks why, in a supposedly enlightened era, girls would “respond with rabid enthusiasm to books that communicate such old-fashioned gender stereotypes?” (B7). His answer will likely not appease *Twilight*’s self-proclaimed feminist critics. He claims that “the fascination that romance holds for many girls is not a mere social construct; it derives from something deeper” (B7). Through his research for *Why Gender Matters*, Sax, a psychologist and family physician, interviewed hundreds of girls throughout the United States, Australia, and New Zealand trying to determine how the recent move toward gender-neutral child rearing has affected the youth of the 21st century. He discovered that “despite all the indoctrination they’ve received to the contrary,” most girls:

believe that human nature is gendered to the core. They are hungry for books that reflect that sensibility. Three decades of adults pretending that gender doesn’t matter haven’t created a generation of feminists who don’t need men; they have instead created a horde of girls who adore the traditional male and female roles and relationships in the “Twilight” saga. Likewise, ignoring gender differences hasn’t created a generation of boys who muse about their feelings while they work on their scrapbooks. Instead, a growing number of boys in this country spend much of their free time absorbed in the masculine mayhem of

video games such as Grand Theft Auto and Halo or surfing the Internet for pornography. (B7)

His central argument is that ignoring gender is not having the desired effect; in fact, it has instead contributed to the widening of the gender divide. His argument is interesting in that it questions the criticism some have against the books – the fear that they will reinforce outdated gender roles. He suggests that young girls will seek out narratives that reinforce these much feared antiquated gender depictions and that the *Twilight* craze is simply verification of this fact, not the cause of it. Sax is not the only scholar to suggest that *Twilight* is a bi-product of its time, of a post-feminist era, and of a generation that sees the women's movement as something completed rather than as always in progress. And while this argument is intriguing, especially because the books were published in a decade that saw a revitalization of conservatism and family values, I suggest that *Twilight*'s success is not due to how well it articulates any shifting beliefs of the 21st century, but more so how it morphs the vampire narrative into the young adult romance genre.

Audience & Age: A Look at How “Adult” & “Young Adult” Vampire Narratives Differ

Vampire narratives seem to mutate slightly when aimed at young adult consumers. When comparing the *Twilight* saga to other print texts such as *Dracula*, *The Vampire Chronicles*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, an obvious difference is the way they depict sexuality. The young adult novels tend to portray primarily heteronormative relationships reinforced by “traditional” family values. All the couples in the novels are heterosexual and quickly enter into lifelong commitments. The print vampire narratives aimed at a more general readership do not limit their relationships in this way; they often include non-

traditional family structures, focus on homosocial relationships, and include characters that could be classified as asexual or bisexual rather than heterosexual. Because of this, the mainstream vampire narratives leave room for more fascinating analyses in terms of sexuality.

Although *Dracula* is certainly not the first work to fall into the category of vampire literature, it is one of the earliest and remains the most influential. Stoker's narrative takes on the form of an epistolary novel composed of diary entries, letters, telegrams, and fictionalized newspaper columns chronicling the attacks of its primary antagonist, the vampire, Count Dracula. The novel focuses on the downfall of one female protagonist, Lucy Westenra, and the subsequent rescue of another female protagonist, Mina Harker, by her husband Jonathan Harker and his associates, Dr. John Seward, Arthur Holmwood, Quincey Morris, and Professor Abraham Van Helsing.

In a Freudian reading of *Dracula*, Christopher Bentley finds what he terms "deviant" sexual behavior throughout the entire novel from the incestuous relationship Dracula has with his three sister/daughter figures to the symbolic adultery present when the many suitors give blood to Lucy, to the "forced quasi-fellatio" invoked when Dracula imposes his blood upon Mina (qtd. in Demetrakopoulos 105). Stephanie Demetrakopoulos notes yet another "perversity" within the text – "the suggestion of group sex" when "all the men surround Arthur in a rather voyeuristic brotherhood as he pounds the stake into Lucy" and earlier "when the three vampire women approach Harker" in a sort of group orgy (105).

Nearly one century after the publication of *Dracula*, Anne Rice's series, *The Vampire Chronicles*, arrived on the literary scene. The first book in the series, *Interview with the Vampire*, was published in 1976 with nine subsequent books released between 1985 and 2003. Like *Twilight*, this series crossed over

onto the big screen with *Interview with the Vampire* (1994); the second and third novels, *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) and *The Queen of the Damned* (1988) served as the foundation of the 2002 film bearing the latter's title. For the purposes of this essay I will only discuss the first book in Rice's series.

Interview with the Vampire is primarily the story of two male vampires, Louis and Lestat, and their pseudo daughter, Claudia. Like Stoker's text, this novel is full of suggestive moments that seem to denote non-normative sexuality. The vampire Lestat's preference for the youthful energy of boy blood suggests homosexuality, and the relationship between Louis and Claudia often feels quite incestuous. The sexualization of Claudia, a child in form, is also significant. Consider this recollection from Louis:

There was something dreadfully sensual about her lounging on the settee in a tiny nightgown of lace and stitched pearls; she became an eerie and powerful seductress... "Doll, doll," I called her. That's what she was. A magic doll. Laughter and infinite intellect and then the round-cheeked face, the bud mouth. "Let me dress you, let me brush your hair," I would say to her out of old habit, aware of her smiling and watching me with the thin veil of boredom over her expression. "Do as you like," she breathed into my ear as I bent down to fasten her pearl buttons. (Rice 102)

Interview with the Vampire also presents scenes where sex is a public spectacle – an act to be performed, watched, and/or experienced en masse. To be clear, these acts are not always sexual in the normal meaning of the word; they usually do not result in standard intercourse but in a different type of erotic penetration – that of the teeth into the flesh. Louis recalls the time when he was presented with a sexual offering in front of a group of onlookers, a willing human who derives

sexual pleasure from the giving of blood:

Never had I felt this, never had I experienced it, this yielding of a conscious mortal. But before I could push him away for his own sake, I saw the bluish bruise on his tender neck. He was offering it to me now, and I felt the hard strength of his sex beneath his clothes pressing against my leg. A wretched gasp escaped my lips, but he bent close, his lips on what must have been so cold, so lifeless for him; and I sank my teeth into his skin, my body rigid, that hard sex driving against me, and I lifted him in passion off the floor. Wave after wave of his beating heart passed into me as weightless, I rocked with him, devouring him, his ecstasy, his conscious pleasure. (Rice 230)

This scene of public feeding between a same sex pairing, an older man and a younger boy, takes on the feeling of a sexual exchange even though one does not technically occur. Its voyeuristic audience experiences the erotic encounter through watching it, much like traditional sexual voyeurs experience sexual encounters vicariously.

A second erotic display of violence comes during the "Theatre des Vampires." During this portion of the novel, Louis and Claudia have been invited to attend a theatrical performance hosted by a group of vampires in Paris. They sit in an audience filled with human theatre-goers expecting to watch a gothic play. However, what the audience receives, although they do not quite understand as much, is a live drama unfolding before their eyes. Instead of watching a staged vampire attack, a fictional narrative about vampires, they sit witnessing a human woman being sexually molested, seduced, attacked, and slaughtered by a group of vampires. This group attack mirrors that of a gang rape. While these adult-targeted vampire narratives do deliver diverse accounts of sexuality which can be celebrated, some

of their sexual diversity, such as this collapsing of sex and violence, is worthy of continued analysis and, perhaps, criticism.

The only young adult vampire narrative discussed here that delves into non-normative sexuality is Joss Whedon's popular television program, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The series focuses on the main character, Buffy, who finds herself living in a city prone to supernatural monstrosities. Buffy fights to save the town again and again from a variety of evils. The most frequent villains are, of course, vampires, but Buffy also battles against zombies, werewolves, witches, and other creatures as the years stretch on. In midst of all of these battles against evil forces, Buffy falls for a set of vampire rivals, Angel and Spike.

Although the majority of the relationships throughout the series are heterosexual, the show introduces bisexuality in season four when Willow and Tara's relationship begins. Despite this addition, which many scholars like David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox have applauded, the program takes a step backward two seasons later when Spike, a vampire with whom Buffy has had a love-hate relationship and an escalating flirtation with throughout the series, attempts to rape Buffy, and she later forgives him.

Although, overall, the mainstream vampire texts offer up a more diverse vision of sexuality, the texts (print and visual) directed at teen audiences most certainly foreground sexuality (albeit usually heterosexuality) more so than those of mainstream culture. As expected, the young adult romance genre caters to storylines of teen angst and sexual stirrings, and therefore consumers receive a profusion of such storylines. Surprisingly, all of the young adult narratives focus predominately on the sexuality of the female characters to the extent that they are depicted more often as the more sexually aggressive gender or, at the very least, the more persistent sexual pursuers.

As noted earlier, Bella is the sexual pursuer in *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*. This notion of the female pursuer is also present in L.J. Smith's earlier series.

In 1991 L.J. Smith's trilogy, *The Vampire Diaries*, was published, with a fourth book released a year later due to fan demand. The series is set in the fictional town of Fell's Church, a center of paranormal activity. It follows the life (and death and rebirth) of Elena Gilbert and the romantic love triangle she enters into with two vampire brothers, Stefan and Damon Salvatore. The brothers are a modern-day version of Cain and Abel, and Elena is attracted to them both for their very different qualities. (This series, like *Buffy* and *Twilight*, suggests that a romantic triangle is a necessary ingredient in any young adult vampire narrative). With this tug-of-war romance at the heart of the narrative, it is not surprising that sexual longing is a common motif throughout these books.

In *The Vampire Diaries* the act of blood exchange is sexualized and Elena is actually the one who first initiates this ("sexual") encounter:

It's time, Stefan, she thought. And, very gently, she drew his mouth down again, this time to her throat. She felt his lips graze her skin, felt his breath warm and cool at once. Then she felt the sharp sting. But the pain faded almost instantly. It was replaced by a feeling of pleasure that made her tremble. A great rushing sweetness filled her, flowing through her to Stefan (Smith, *The Awakening*, 238)

Buffy also depicts female characters as being the more aggressive gender, portraying many of them as seducers and temptresses. Some examples include Darla (a character cast as a vampire villain early in the series, who first seduced and then turned Angel into a vampire), Faith (another vampire slayer, a foil to Buffy, who attempted to seduce both her best friend, Xander, and her love interest, Angel), and Anya (a

member of Buffy's friend circle, and also a mythical vengeance demon, who started her relationship with Xander by seducing him).

In these teen narratives human (and vampire) sexuality abounds. However, this is not the case in the mainstream texts directed toward a larger, often more adult, audience – at least as far as the humans go. As Demetrakopoulos notes concerning *Dracula*, in these texts intended for a larger readership, “all sexuality is relegated to the vampires” (111). This difference seems important to note being that throughout time sexualized characters have often been demonized. The assignment of sexuality to vampires only in the mainstream narratives like *Dracula* and *Interview with the Vampire* seems to follow in this tradition. However, the shift in the young adult narratives to a more sexual character cast that includes both humans and mythical beings indicates a purposeful departure from this norm and presents the possibility of reading sexuality as something positive rather than negative.

However, this abundance of sexual activity amongst the teenage characters in *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Buffy* comes with a price. Despite not damaging the characterizations of the sexualized participants, all three of the series seem to carry the didactic warning that sex, be it standard sexual intercourse or sexualized blood exchanges, is a punishable act. Bella receives the biblically promised punishment of a painful (and ultimately “life” ending) pregnancy and childbirth. Elena has sensual blood exchanges with two brothers, which result in her unintentional rebirth as a vampire. And Buffy's punishment comes a bit more indirectly, when her love, Angel, loses his soul immediately after they have sex for the first time as a punishment for experiencing a moment of true happiness. This underlying motif is not as obvious in the mainstream vampire texts but it is implied. For example, Demetrakopoulos argues that *Dracula* constantly insists “on the dualism of

sexual passion (bad) and sexual innocence (good)” (111). And Jules Law points out that Mina’s survival is predictable in the text because she is, unlike Lucy, a less sexualized heroine (986).

Conclusion

It has been the intent of this essay to demonstrate that *Twilight* borrows from a long-standing tradition of narratives criticized for their portrayals of gender and sexuality and thus inherits similar critiques. In comparing vampire texts produced in different time periods, directed at different audiences, and even delivered through different media formats, it is clear that they all could be found problematic in one way or another. Despite being produced and consumed in different epochs, many of these texts could be accused of being hostile toward female sexuality and of being overly concerned with the purity of their female characters. Also problematic in some of these storylines are the coupling of sexuality and violence, the policing of heterosexuality and stereotypical gender roles, and the depiction of sexuality as punishable. Placing the criticism of all of these vampire narratives up against each other sheds light onto the criticism the *Twilight* series has received, revealing that it is not the first vampire narrative to be criticized in this way. Reading *Twilight* alongside of the other young adult vampire narratives also showcases how some of the problems readers have with Meyer’s books may stem from its adherence to the norms of the genre, such as the reliance on heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. However, in looking at the two subsets of vampire narratives together, it is also clear that the vampire narratives have the potential to develop subversive storylines that can question these very notions. For example, the adult vampire narratives frequently include non-normative sexuality and plots that question dominant cultural beliefs about gender.

If young adult vampire narratives can adopt these tactics, they will be less likely to face the firing squads of feminism.

Some scholars have suggested that vampire narratives reflect the cultural time periods in which they were crafted, that these tales saturated with gender and sexuality issues reveal societal shifts concerning feminism. In this vein it could be argued that the *Twilight* saga, a cultural artifact of the early 21st century, is a product of an ideological swing to conservatism and a period of waning interest in women's rights within the youth of the United States. Although this may be true to some degree, I suggest that it does not fully explain *Twilight's* popularity, nor does it explain the multitude of similarities between it and the vampire narratives produced before it. The similar thematic messages present within these narratives, and the similar gender critiques they have received, suggest that perhaps the world consuming the *Twilight* saga is not all that changed from that which read Rice's series or Stoker's canonical text. Ultimately, the series did not rise to fame because of how well it articulates any shifting beliefs of the 21st century, but rather it did so because of how it successfully capitalizes on the long lived practice of merging the vampire narrative into the young adult romance genre, resulting in predictable patterns and familiar feminist critiques.

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